

EU Translation Guide



edited and published by Nicolae Sfetcu

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This ebook represents an independent adaptation of the European Commission work '[How to Write Clearly](#)', freely available via the EU Bookshop. © European Union, 2011

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Think before you write

Clear writing starts with and depends on clear thinking. Ask yourself:

Who will be reading the document?

Three main groups of people read European Commission documents:

- EU insiders - colleagues in the European Commission or other institutions
- outside specialists
- the general public - which is by far the largest group.

Most European Commission documents are now on the internet and, available to everyone. Everything we write and publish as part of our work for the European Commission inevitably affects the public image of the EU.

What are you trying to achieve?

What is the purpose of your document? After reading it, what will your readers have to do?

- make a decision?
- handle a certain situation?
- solve a particular problem?
- change their attitude towards something?

What points must the document cover?

- Decide on your message.
- Make a list or bubble diagram containing all the points you expect to make, in no particular order.
- Cross out the irrelevant points.
- Link the remaining points into related groups.
- Fill any gaps in your knowledge: make a note of facts you will need to check and/or experts you will need to consult.

This approach applies to practically all non-literary texts: memos, reports, letters, user guides, etc. For formal documents such as legislation, specific drafting rules

must be followed.

An alternative is the **7 questions approach**. This is a structured method of covering relevant information:

1. **WHAT?** My essential message
2. **WHO?** Persons concerned
3. **WHEN?** Days, hours, timelines, deadlines
4. **WHERE?** Places
5. **HOW?** Circumstances, explanations
6. **WHY?** Causes and/or objective
7. **HOW MUCH?** Calculable and measurable data.

Focus on the reader

Be direct and interesting

Always consider the people you're really writing for: not just your boss, or the reviser of your translations, but the end users. Like you, they're in a hurry. Who are they, what do they already know, and what might you need to explain?

Try to see your subject from the point of view of your readers:

- **Involve them** by addressing them directly ('you' is an under-used word in European Commission documents).

- **Imagine which questions** they might ask, and make sure the document answers them. Maybe even use these questions as sub-headings. For example: 'What changes will this new policy make?' 'Why is this policy needed?' 'Who will be affected?' 'What do we expect to achieve?'.

- **Interest them**. Give them only the information they actually need. Leave out as many details of European Commission procedures and interinstitutional formalities as you can. These are meaningless to most readers and simply reinforce the Commission's image as a bureaucratic and distant institution. If they are really essential, briefly say why.

Now you can make your outline.

Get your document into shape

When you start

If your outline include a **summary**, begin with that: you may find it is enough! Put it at the beginning because that is the first (and sometimes the only) part that people will read.

Pay particular attention to links that will help readers to follow your **logic and reasoning**. Choose headings and other 'signposts' that will enable them to find key information to save you repeating it throughout the document. Use informative headings and sub-headings to highlight the most important points of the document. A heading such as 'Mergers need to be monitored more carefully' is more informative than 'Monitoring mergers'.

Consider how best to make your points and keep your document reader-friendly: could you use **icons, graphs, or tables instead of text**? Do you need a glossary or a list of definitions?

After the beginning, the next most frequently read part is the conclusion. A reader may skip everything in between to get to the **conclusion**. Make it clear, concise and to the point.

Show your readers the structure of longer documents by including a clear **table of contents**.

As you write

Follow the hints.

Consult drafting aids.

Keep cutting! Be tough - ask if each section and each word is really necessary. Cut out superfluous words, but make sure the message is still clear.

- BAD: The deadline to be observed for the submission of applications is 31 March 2014.
- BETTER: The deadline for submitting applications is 31 March 2012.
- GOOD: Application deadline: 31 March 2012.

Two common problems at the European Commission:

1. Recycling an earlier text without adapting it properly

Older models may be unclearly written and may not reflect new circumstances and new drafting practices. Take care to make all the necessary adaptations.

2. Cutting and pasting

You may have to use passages from a variety of documents to assemble a new text. Beware of inconsistent terminology, repetition or omission: these can undermine the internal logic and clarity of the end result.

KISS - Keep It Short and Simple

Short...

The value of a document does not increase the longer it gets. Your readers will not respect you more because you have written 20 pages instead of 10, especially when they realise that you could have written what you wanted to say in 10. They may well resent you for taking more of their time than necessary.

Some way to cut out unnecessary words include:

- Not cluttering your document with redundant expressions like 'as is well known', 'it is generally accepted that', 'in my personal opinion', 'and so on and so forth', 'both from the point of view of A and from the point of view of B'.
- Not repeating yourself. When referring to, say, a committee with a long name, write out the full name once only.

Shorter documents and shorter sentences tend to have more impact.

As a guide:

1 document = 15 pages at the most

1 sentence = 20 words on average

(but sprinkle in a few short sentences!)

Unnecessarily long sentences are a serious obstacle to clarity in European Commission documents. Try to break them up into shorter sentences. But remember to include link words ('but', 'so', 'however') so the coherence doesn't get lost in the process.

... and Simple:

Use simple words where possible. Simple language will not make you seem less learned or elegant; it will make you more credible.

- in view of the fact that => as
- a certain number of => some
- the majority of => most
- pursuant to => under
- within the framework of => under
- accordingly, consequently => so
- for the purpose of => to
- in the event of => if
- if this is not the case => if not
- if this is the case => if so
- concerning, regarding, relating to => on

- with reference to, with to => about

Simple, uncluttered style also means:

... avoiding ambiguity

If you use the same word to refer to different things, you could confuse your reader:

- BAD: You must hand in your application by Tuesday. You may also submit an application for this deadline to be postponed. Your application... (*what are we talking about now?*)
- GOOD: You must hand in your application by Tuesday. You may also ask for the deadline to be postponed. Your application...

... not changing words just for 'style'

You may think you can make your document less boring by using different words to refer to the same thing. Again, though, you could confuse your reader:

- BAD: You must hand in your application by Tuesday. The committee may turn down your request... (*i.e. your application or - is it?*).
- GOOD: You must hand in your application by Tuesday. The committee may turn it down...

...using the positive form, not the negative

- BAD: It is **not uncommon** for applications to be rejected, **so do not complain unless** you are sure you have **not** completed yours incorrectly.
- GOOD: It is **quite common** for applications to be rejected, so **complain only** if you are sure you have completed yours **correctly**.

Make sense - structure your sentences

You may have to write (or improve) a text containing a mass of facts and ideas. Here are some ways of untangling the information so that readers will understand each sentence straight away.

Name the **agents** of each action and put the actions in the order in which they occur.

- BAD: Its decision on allocation of EU assistance will be taken subsequent to receipt of all project applications at the Award Committee's meeting.
- GOOD: When all **applicants** have submitted their project applications, the Award **Committee** will meet to decide how much EU aid **it** will grant to each one.

Don't bury important information in the middle of the sentence.

- BAD: As for reducing **roaming charges**, the Commission outlined several proposals.
- GOOD: The Commission outlined several proposals for reducing **roaming charges**.

- BAD: The smoking in restaurants **ban** now seems likely to be implemented.
- GOOD: Smoking in restaurants is now likely to be **banned**.

*Try to give your sentences **strong endings** - that's the bit readers will remember.*

- BAD: Complete institutional reform is advocated by the report in most cases.
- GOOD: In most cases, the report advocates **complete institutional reform**.

Cut out excess nouns - verb forms are livelier

One simple way to write more clearly is to change ...

- this (BAD)... => ... to this (GOOD):
- by the destruction of => by destroying
- for the maximisation of => for maximising
- of the introduction of => of introducing

By making this change, we are simply turning a noun back into a verb. Verbs are more direct and less abstract than nouns. Many nouns ending in '-ion' are simply verbs in disguise. They often occur in phrases like those below, where verbs would be clearer:

- carry out an evaluation of => evaluate
- hold an investigation of => investigate
- give consideration to => consider

There are other nouns that don't end in '-ion' but which are also verbs in disguise:

- conduct a review of => review
- perform an assessment of => assess
- effect a renewal of => renew

So we can make a document clearer by turning some nouns back into verbs:

- BAD: The practice of growing perennials instead of annual crops can bring about an improvement of soil quality by effecting an increase in soil cover.
- GOOD: Growing perennials instead of annual crops can improve soil quality by increasing soil cover.

Be concrete, not abstract

Concrete messages are clear - abstract language can be vague and off-putting. Too much abstract language might even lead your reader to think either that you don't know what you are writing about or that your motives for writing are suspect.

Unless you have a good reason, if you can use a concrete word instead of a more abstract word that means the same, **choose the concrete word**.

Your message will be more direct and therefore more powerful.

Sometimes,

- instead of this...: ~ you could try this:
- eliminate ~ cut out
- achieve an objective ~ meet a target
- employment opportunities ~ jobs
- negative evolution ~ downturn
- remunerated employment ~ paid work
- investing in human capital * ~ (workforce) training, improving (workers') skills, training and education

* As this example shows, the problem is often pinning down your exact meaning.

TIP: In Word, highlight and right-click on a word and select 'Synonyms', near the bottom of the menu that appear, to find the word you are really looking for. The list of synonyms will contain both abstract and concrete words. Try to choose a concrete word instead of a vaguer all-purpose one. For example, the word **identify** is perfectly acceptable, but sometimes a clearer word is better:

- to **identify** innovations ~ to spot innovations
- to **identify** the participants ~ to name the participants
- to **identify** the meaning ~ to see / show / pinpoint the meaning

Prefer active verbs to passive

Another easy step to dear writing is to use verbs in the active voice ('the car hit a tree') rather than the passive ('a tree **was hit by** the car'). Compare these:

- BAD: New guidelines **have been laid down** by the President in the hope that the length of documents submitted by DGs **will be restricted** to 15 pages.
- GOOD: The president **has laid down** new guidelines in the hope that DGs **will restrict** the length of documents to 15 pages.

Look how we can make a sentence clearer by cutting out passives...:

- **Unclear:** A *recommendation was made* by the European Parliament that consideration be given by the Member States to a simplification of the procedure.
- **A bit better:** The European Parliament *made a recommendation* that the Member States give consideration to a simplification of the procedure.

and finally by using verbs instead of abstract nouns:

- **Much better:** The European Parliament *recommended* that the Member States consider simplifying the procedure.

Name the agent

If you change passive verb forms into active ones, your writing will become clearer because you will be forced to name the agent - the person, organisation or thing that is carrying out the action.

It's easy to identify the agent here...

- BAD: This project was rejected *at Commission level*.
- GOOD: **The Commission** rejected this project.

... but impossible here:

It is considered that tobacco advertising should be banned in the EU.

Who considers? The writer, the Commission, the public, the medical profession?

Remember that EU documents have to be translated into several languages. If your original document is unclear, you may end up with non-matching translations, as each translator tries to guess what you might have meant and comes up with a different solution.

But you don't have to avoid passives at all costs. They can be useful, for example when there's no need to say who is responsible for the action because it's obvious ('All staff are encouraged to write clearly').

Beware of false friends, jargon and abbreviations

Avoid false friends

False friends (or *faux amis*) are pairs of words in two languages that look similar but differ in meaning.

In a multilingual environment like the European Commission, we often mix up our languages. Borrowing between French and English is common. For instance, 'to control' in English normally means 'to command/direct' or 'to restrict/limit'. It does not mean simply 'to check/supervise' like '*contrôler*' in French. Using the wrong word can alienate readers, making the EU institutions look like a closed club that is out of touch with the real world. In the worst case, it can lead to misunderstandings and diplomatic incidents (for example, if you just want to say that Luxembourg is small, but you write that 'Luxembourg is not an important country').

French	False friend	Why is it wrong?	What's the correct word?
<i>actuel</i>	actual	'actual' means 'real'	current, topical
<i>adequat</i>	adequate	'adequate' means 'sufficient'	suitable
<i>assister à</i>	assist at	'assist' means 'help'	attend, participate in
<i>attribuer</i>	attribute to	'attribute to' means 'consider to be due to/characteristic of'	allocate to, assign to
<i>compléter</i>	complete	'complete' means 'finish'	supplement
<i>délai</i>	delay	'a delay' means 'a postponement or hold-up' (= retard in French)	deadline, time limit
<i>élaborer</i>	elaborate (verb)	'to elaborate' means 'to go into detail'	draft, develop, produce
<i>éventuel</i>	eventual	'eventual' means 'ultimate'	any
<i>prévu</i>	foreseen	'foreseen' means 'predicted'	provided for, planned
<i>important</i>	important	'important' is right if you mean 'significant'; but not if you mean >	> large
<i>matériel</i>	material	'material' means 'matter', 'information'	supplies, equipment
<i>opportunité</i>	opportunity	'opportunity' means 'chance'	advisability
<i>perspectives</i>	perspectives	'perspective' means 'standpoint'	prospects, outlook
<i>respecter</i>	respect	'to respect' means 'to value' or 'honour' someone or something	comply with (rules), meet (a deadline)
<i>sensible</i>	sensible	'sensible' means 'reasonable'	sensitive

Avoid or explain jargon

Jargon is vocabulary used by any group of insiders or specialists to communicate with each other, and is acceptable in documents which are only read by that group.

However, outsiders (especially the general public) will have to work harder than they need to or want to when reading jargon. Some readers may even stop reading - so make sure that any document you want outsiders to read is as jargon-free as possible.

And if you DO have to use jargon terms in documents for the general public, explain them when you first use them, or add a glossary, a hyperlink or a reference to one of the websites indicated at the bottom of this page.

This non-exhaustive list contains a number of terms commonly used in the EU institutions:

- **Jargon term = Suggested definition**
- acceding country = country about to join the EU
- acquis (communautaire) = body of EU law
- candidate country = country still negotiating to join the EU
- cohesion = approach aimed at reducing social and economic disparities within the EU
- comitology = procedure under which the Commission consults committees of experts
- Community method = method developed for taking decisions in the EU, where the Commission, Parliament and Council work together
- enlargement = expansion of the EU to include new members
- mainstreaming = taking into account in all EU policies
- proportionality = principle that a level of government must not take any action that exceeds that necessary to carry out its assigned tasks
- subsidiarity = principle that, wherever possible, decisions must be taken at the level of government closest to citizens

Clear explanations of much jargon can be found in the 'Plain Language Guide to Eurojargon' section on the Europa website (http://europa.eu/abdeurojargon/index_en.htm).

For definitions of more technical and legal terms arising in an EU context, see the online Europa Glossary (http://europa.eu/scadplus/glossary/index_en.htm).

Take care with abbreviations

Too many unfamiliar abbreviations can make a document incomprehensible and send your reader to sleep:

(ERDF + EAGGF + CAP = ZZZ).

If the meaning of an abbreviation might not be clear to your reader, you should:

- write them out in full if the expression only occurs once or twice in the document; or
- spell them out when you first use them in a document, followed by the abbreviation in brackets, and then use the abbreviation in the rest of the document; and/or
- attach a list of abbreviations or a hyperlink to show what they stand for.

The 'Main Acronyms and Abbreviations' section of the Interinstitutional Style Guide (<http://publications.europa.eu/code/en/en-S000400.htm>) defines many of the acronyms and abbreviations used in European Commission documents.

As always, consider your readers' needs:

- Some readers will be irritated if 'common' abbreviations are spelled out.
- Writing 'marketing authorisation holder' on every other line instead of 'MAH' will make the document much longer.

Remember that abbreviations and acronyms can mean different things in different contexts.

For example:

ESA stands for

- European Space Agency
- Euratom Supply Agency
- European System of Accounts
- Endangered Species Act
- Environmentally Sensitive Area
- Eastern and Southern Africa
- Electron Stimulated Adsorption
- and several other alternatives.

Revise and ~~cheque~~ check

Use spelling and grammar checkers, but be aware that they don't pick up all mistakes.

Re-read your document critically, putting yourself in the reader's shoes. Are the sentences and paragraphs clearly linked? Do they follow logically from each other? There will always be something you can improve or simplify.

Ask colleagues to comment including some who haven't been consulted earlier

Listen to their suggestions carefully.

Follow those which improve brevity, clarity and reader-friendliness.

Nicolae Sfetcu

web design, e-commerce and other web applications * internet marketing, SEO, online advertising, branding * software localization, English - Romanian - French translation * articles, desktop publishing, secretarial services * powerpoint, word and pdf presentation, image, audio and video editing * e-book conversion, editing and publishing, isbn

E-mail: nicolae@sfetcu.com

MultiMedia SRL <http://www.multimedia.com.ro/>

Web services: <http://www.teleactivities.com/>

Book editing: <http://www.setthings.com/>

Translation <http://www.translation2ro.com/>

Personal: <http://www.sfetcu.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/nicolae.sfetcu>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/nicolae>

LinkedIn: <http://www.linkedin.com/in/nicolaesfetcu>

Google Plus: <https://www.google.com/+NicolaeSfetcu>